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ABSTRACT

Among teachers and parents who avoid punishing children, many turn instead to the use of rewards. However, as with punishment, the offer of rewards can elicit temporary compliance but is no more effective at helping children become responsible people or self-directed learners. Extrinsic motivators, such as rewards, do not alter commitments that underlie behavior. Nor are rewards helpful at enhancing achievement. At least two dozen studies have shown that people expecting a reward for completing a task do not perform as well as those who expect nothing. This effect is robust across age, gender, and type of task. Other studies have documented the phenomenon that rewards cause people to lose interest in whatever they were rewarded for doing. Still other studies have shown that people who are offered rewards for performing tasks will generally choose the easiest task to perform. In the absence of rewards, by contrast, children are inclined to pick tasks that are just beyond their current level of ability. To deal with the implications of these data, classroom management practices that rely on rewards ought to be reconsidered. Assessment practices should be designed so that children experience success and failure not as reward and punishment, but as information. When children receive feedback in the form of information, they are helped to develop their own criteria for successful learning instead of encouraged to be dependent on securing someone else's approval, and they experience unconditional support instead of a positive response that is conditional on meeting someone else's demands. Contains 12 references. (BC)

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The Risks of Rewards

Alfie Kohn

Many educators are acutely aware that punishment and threats are counterproductive. Making children suffer in order to alter their future behavior can often elicit temporary compliance, but this strategy is unlikely to help children become ethical, compassionate decision makers. Punishment, even if referred to euphemistically as "consequences," tends to generate anger, defiance, and a desire for revenge. Moreover, it models the use of power rather than reason and ruptures the important relationship between adult and child.

Of those teachers and parents who make a point of not punishing children, a significant proportion turn instead to the use of rewards. The ways in which rewards are used, as well the values that are considered important, differ among (and within) cultures. This digest, however, deals with typical practices in classrooms in the United States, where stickers and stars, A's and praise, awards and privileges, are routinely used to induce children to learn or comply with an adult's demands (Fantuzzo et al., 1991). As with punishments, the offer of rewards can elicit temporary compliance in many cases. Unfortunately, carrots turn out to be no more effective than sticks at helping children to become caring, responsible people or lifelong, self-directed learners.

Rewards vs. Good Values

Studies over many years have found that behavior modification programs are rarely successful at producing lasting changes in attitudes or even behavior. When the rewards stop, people usually return to the way they acted before the program began. More disturbingly, researchers have recently discovered that children whose parents make frequent use of rewards tend to be less generous than their peers (Fabes et al., 1989; Grusec, 1991; Kohn 1990).

Indeed, extrinsic motivators do not alter the emotional or cognitive *commitments* that underlie behavior—at least not in a desirable direction. A child promised a treat for learning or acting responsibly has been given every reason to stop doing so when there is no longer a reward to be gained.

Research and logic suggest that punishment and rewards are not really opposites, but two sides of the same coin. Both strategies amount to ways of trying to manipulate someone's behavior—in one case, prompting the question, "What do they want me to do, and what happens to me if I don't do it?", and in the other instance, leading a child to ask, "What do they want me to do, and what do I get for doing it?" Neither strategy helps children to grapple with the question, "What kind of person do I want to be?"

Rewards vs. Achievement

Rewards are no more helpful at enhancing achievement than they are at fostering good values. At least two dozen studies have shown that people expecting to receive a reward for completing a task (or for doing it successfully) simply do not perform as well as those who expect nothing (Kohn, 1993). This effect is robust for young children, older children, and adults; for males and females; for rewards of all kinds; and for tasks ranging from memorizing facts to designing collages to solving problems. In general, the more cognitive sophistication and open-ended thinking that is required for a task, the worse people tend to do when they have been led to perform that task for a reward.

There are several plausible explanations for this puzzling but remarkably consistent finding. The most compelling of these is that *rewards cause people to lose interest in whatever they were rewarded for doing.* This phenomenon, which has been demonstrated in scores of studies (Kohn, 1993), makes sense given that "motivation" is not a single characteristic that an individual possesses to a greater or lesser degree. Rather, intrinsic motivation (an interest in the task for its own sake) is qualitatively different from extrinsic motivation (in which completion of the task is seen chiefly as a prerequisite for obtaining something else) (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Therefore, the question educators need to ask is not how motivated their students are, but how their students are motivated.

In one representative study, young children were introduced to an unfamiliar beverage called kefir. Some were just asked to drink it; others were praised lavishly for doing so; a third group was promised treats if they drank enough. Those children who received either verbal or tangible rewards consumed more of the beverage than other children, as one might predict. But a week later these children found it significantly less appealing than they did before, whereas children who were offered no rewards liked it just as much as, if not more than, they had earlier (Birch et al., 1984). If we substitute reading or doing math or acting generously for drinking kefir, we begin to glimpse the destructive power of rewards. The data suggest that the more we want children to *want* to do something, the more counterproductive it will be to reward them for doing it.

Deci and Ryan (1985) describe the use of rewards as "control through seduction." Control, whether by threats or bribes, amounts to doing things *to* children rather than working *with* them. This ultimately frays relationships, both among students (leading to reduced interest in working with peers) and

PS 022935

between students and adults (insofar as asking for help may reduce the probability of receiving a reward).

Moreover, students who are encouraged to think about grades, stickers, or other "goodies" become less inclined to explore ideas, think creatively, and take chances. At least ten studies have shown that people offered a reward generally choose the easiest possible task (Kohn, 1993). In the absence of rewards, by contrast, children are inclined to pick tasks that are just beyond their current level of ability.

Practical Implications of the Failure of Rewards

The implications of this analysis and these data are troubling. If the question is "Do rewards motivate students?", the answer is, "Absolutely: they motivate students to get rewards." Unfortunately, that sort of motivation often comes at the expense of interest in, and excellence at, whatever they are doing. What is required, then, is nothing short of a transformation of our schools.

First, classroom management programs that rely on rewards and consequences ought to be avoided by any educator who wants students to take responsibility for their own (and others') behavior—and by any educator who places internalization of positive values ahead of mindless obedience. The alternative to bribes and threats is to work toward creating a caring community whose members solve problems collaboratively and decide together how they want their classroom to be (DeVries & Zan, 1994; Solomon et al., 1992).

Second, grades in particular have been found to have a detrimental effect on creative thinking, long-term retention, interest in learning, and preference for challenging tasks (Butler & Nisan, 1986; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987). These detrimental effects are not the result of too many bad grades, too many good grades, or the wrong formula for calculating grades. Rather, they result from the practice of grading itself, and the extrinsic orientation it promotes. Parental use of rewards or consequences to induce children to do well in school has a similarly negative effect on enjoyment of learning and, ultimately, on achievement (Gottfried et al., 1994). Avoiding these effects requires assessment practices geared toward helping students experience success and failure not as reward and punishment, but as information.

Finally, this distinction between reward and information might be applied to positive feedback as well. While it can be useful to hear about one's successes, and highly desirable to receive support and encouragement from adults, most praise is tantamount to verbal reward. Rather than helping children to develop their own criteria for successful learning or desirable behavior, praise can create a growing dependence on securing someone else's approval. Rather than offering unconditional support, praise makes a positive response conditional on doing what the adult demands. Rather than heightening interest in a task, the learning is devalued insofar as it comes to be seen as a prerequisite for receiving the teacher's approval (Kohn, 1993).

Conclusion

In short, good values have to be grown from the inside out. Attempts to short-circuit this process by dangling rewards in front of children are at best ineffective, and at worst counterproductive. Children are likely to become enthusiastic, lifelong learners as a result of being provided with an engaging curriculum; a safe, caring community in which to discover and create; and a significant degree of choice about what (and how and why) they are learning. Rewards—like punishments—are unnecessary when these things are present, and are ultimately destructive in any case.

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